Tolstoy and His Wife

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Lev Nikolaevich returned. He did not, however, come upstairs, but lay on the couch downstairs. In an interval of pain she ran down to him; he would not speak to her. At 7 o'clock in the morning her daughter Aleksandra was born. "I shall never forget that terrible bright June night," she writes, so simply and unemotionally that it leaves one almost amazed; no art or eloquence could be more effective.

The rift ever widened and became a chasm; unhappiness grew upon both sides. Illness came to them. The children married. The big house where childish voices had rung, where sweet music had resounded, was empty, full of shadows and eerie echoes. Toystoy's gloom deepened, became terrifying. "He began again to dream of some great act of renunciation. . . . He was annoyed with the family. . . . He was often angry with me. We were what stood in the way of his carrying out his dream of a free, new life, of an act of renunciation."

Then came the drama of the will. The first will, disposing of Tolstoy's estate and all his papers, proved illegal. A new will was prepared in which Countess Tolstoy was excluded from all participation. Conspiracy was in the air—a conspiracy of which Chertkov, Tolstoy's friend for many years, was the prime mover. The demoniac power of Chertkov and other "friends" who were Sophie Andreevena's enemies, is vividly brought out in a few lines. "There began a terrible period of painful struggle . . . while Lev Nikolaevich's friends worked deliberately, subtly, on the mind of an old man whose memory and powers were growing feeble." The "friends" triumphed; the will was signed by Tolstoy in the forest on July 23, 1910, in the presence of Chertkov. The hysterical condition of his wife, her abnormal reaction to this secret conspiracy, may or may not suffice to explain the intensity of hatred and loathing expressed by Tolstoy in his diary on the eve of his departure. These entries are eloquent.

27th October, 1910: All night I had bad dreams. The difficulty of our relation is increasing.

28th October, 1910: I looked and saw through a chink a bright light in my study and heard rustling. It is Sophie Andreevna, searching for something, and probably reading my papers. . . . Again steps, a cautious opening of the door, and she passes by. I do not know why this has roused in me such overpowering repulsion and indignation. . . . The repulsion and indignation are growing. I am choking. I count my pulse: 97. I cannot lie down, and I suddenly come to a final decision to go. . . .

A nightmarish packing, aided by Dr. Makovitsi and Tolstoy's daughter Aleksandra, and the great writer goes forth into the pitchblack night to his impending doom. He loses his way in the wood, returns covered with bruises and scratches, finally reaches the stable. The horses are harnessed. What were the thoughts of this old man of genius, this Russian King Lear of the steppes, haggard, shaking, ridden by insane furies of his distraught imagination? "I tremble, expecting that Sophie Andreevna will pursue me." At last he is in the train. The rest is known.

Countess Tolstoy reads the letter her husband left behind. Filled with a terrible despair she throws herself into the pond, seeking death. When Lev Nikolaevich hears of this, she was told after her rescue, he "wept bitterly" but he would not return. The news that he was at the point of death at Astapovo Station gives her new life. She hastens to him but finds herself upon a fool's errand. The wife of the smitten giant's bosom, who had borne him many children, the companion and sharer in joy and sorrow for nearly half a century, is prevented by force from seeing him before he dies. She tries frenziedly to peer in through the window; the "friends" within draw the curtain across the pane. Her supreme bitterness may be surmised: it is only suggested in her memoirs. The day after the funeral she is smitten with pneumonia and is critically ill for eighteen days.

The psychological problem in the case is fascinating. What was the real motive behind Tolstoy's unremitting wish to "go away?" Even these memoirs hint of mystery. "So much has been and will be written about it, but no one will know the real cause. Let *his* biographers try to find out."

The "going away" has evoked a whole literature in Russia. It was a cause celebre before the war and bids fair, after the publication of these memoirs, to be reopened after it. All humanity is now called to judge between Leo Tolstoy and his wife. Many a Russian woman has said to me: "I hate Tolstoy because of the way he treated his wife." Every story, it is needless to say, has two sides: the wife's side is only now narrated. In the judgment to be reached the letters exchanged between the two, Tolstoy's diary and Countess Tolstoy's autobiography must all be weighed and considered. The poignancy of the problem is enhanced by the fact that Tolstoy was an ethical teacher and that to his disciples his actions are bound up in his teachings. Whatever be the virdict, Tolstoy's wife has now had her say. A woman whose soul was like a calm and shallow pool, on which the shadow of thought lightly rested, a woman, product of generations of womanly influences, created for household cares, the bearing of children, quiet, unimaginative, unoriginal, uncreative, simply religious and alien to cosmic broodings, linked with a human volcano, a brooding Russian Titan, a Promethean madman, searching after Truth for love of humanity, filled with insane dreams of renunciations and pilgrimages—poor woman! The only suffering conceivably greater, judged by intensity of temperament, must have been that of Leo Tolstoy himself.

Alexandra the Ill Starred

A Review By STEWART T. BEACH.

THE REAL TSARITSA. By Lili Dehn. Little, Brown & Co.

THE debacle of the Imperial Government of Russia in 1917 sent a cloud of ominous rumor and scandal hovering about the name of the Empress Alexandra. Even before the crash came about, slander had whispered the story of her supposed liaison with Rasputin, the peasant monk. But with the failure of the Russian offensives, it was rumored that the pro-German sympathies of the Empress were responsible for the defeat of her armies, and treason was added to the list of crimes laid at the feet of this most unfortunate personage.

Now comes Madame Lili Dehn, the most intimate friend of the Tsaritsa, not only to clear her name from the charges which have denigrated it, but to give to the world a real insight and understanding into the life of the royal family. Madame Dehn makes no attempt to assume the task of the historian, presenting the events of a more political nature, which led to the institution of revolution and revolt in Russia. Rather, she is the biographer, recounting not only what she heard but what she saw as well of the Tsaritsa from the time of their first meeting in 1907 until imprisonment by Kerensky separated them finally in 1917.

Madame Dehn has divided her account into two parts, called respectively Old and New Russia. The first sketches rather rapidly a picture of her own early life and of the condition of the peasantry under the imperialistic regime. The second begins with February 25, 1917, the day when alarming disorders first occurred in the streets of Petrograd and gives an intimate account of the life in the palace at Tsarkoe Selo, where Madame Dehn remained the constant friend and adviser of the Empress until circumstances forced their separation.

There can be little question of the value of the book, not only as a document in the controversy concerning the real character of the Tsaritsa, but as historical data witnessing the terrible moments in the palace surrounding the abdication of the Czar. Madame Dehn was present when the news of his abdication was received by the Empress and witnessed, too, his return to imprisonment in the palace, when she heard the story from his own lips. Through it all, she shows the Tsaritsa a woman, interested in her children rather than as the figure whose intrigues had thrown an entire country into confusion. Her terrible tragedy is not that of the Empress, but of the wife and mother, fearful for the safety of her husband and her children.

The entire episode of Rasputin's appearance at court is recounted by Madame Dehn, together with the incidents which have given rise to the suggestions of his fanatical hold over the royal family. According to her, he had never held a shred of influence in political circles and was tolerated at court simply because coincidence had connected the recovery from illness of the Tsarevitch with his prayers over him and gratitude seemed to force the Czar to refuse the suggestions of his advisers to send Rasputin home when scandal was linking his name with that of the Empress.

It is difficult after reading Madame Dehn's book to remain uninfluenced by the picture which she paints. Here is no woman torn by the machinations of political intrigue, but a simple wife in whom love for a husband who returned her affection in full measure and devotion to her family were the dominating emotions. Far from being pro-German, the author shows that "Uncle Willie," as the children were in the habit of disrespectfully referring to the former Kaiser, was held in disfavor, not only by the Tsaritsa, but by all the members of the royal family. Madame Dehn has had an intimacy with the Empress which far exceeds that enjoyed by any of the more journalistic chroniclers who have sought to give the world an account of her life. It is her opinion that the defamation of the former Tsaritsa was simply part of a revolutionary plan, furthered in the hope of withdrawing the affections of the peasantry from their rulers. Her tone has the stamp of feeling and of authenticity. Certainly her evidence will throw new light upon a much disputed period of Russian history.

The Book Factory

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"The Jester Book of Columbia Light Verse," edited by Otto v. St. Whitelock, is an interesting volume, though the book might more appropriately have been called "The Jester Book of Columbia Verse," since it contains serious poems by James S. O'Neale, Jr., Floyd W. Taylor, R. A. S., and others.